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Intentional Leadership for More Just Experiences: Supporting Black Males on College Campuses

John Egan (Georgia Southern University)

This essay explores the unjust experiences of Black males and minority faculty on college campuses that perpetuate inequality in higher education. The literature shows Black male undergraduates experienced both overt racism and more subtle insults on some college campuses, which serve as a barrier to integration into the college system. This essay also connects the underrepresentation of minority faculty as a contributing factor to the climate that inhibits the integration of Black male students into the college system. Through intentional leadership, educators should create or support existing Black male initiative programs on their campuses as this evidence-based practice contributes to the performance, retention, and college engagement of Black male undergraduates. To address underrepresentation of minority faculty and staff, educational leaders may consider advocating for an empirically supported three-pronged approach to include a hiring search toolkit, a biases video or workshop, and professional mentoring. The suggested interventions by no means serve as a “solution” to these complex issues, but collegiate leaders should take concrete actions that bend toward more just institutions.

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Dewey (1916/2009) described public education as being crucial for a just democracy, and to avoid fatal stratification society “must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms” (p. 50). Accessibility and equity in education are called into question when two-thirds of Black males fail to finish college in six years (Harper & Harris, 2012). The unjust experiences of Black male undergraduates and minority faculty on college campuses perpetuates inequality. Through intentional leadership and the application of evidence-based practices, professionals in higher education can lead positive change as they contest these issues.

Unjust Experiences of Black Male Undergraduates

Black males consistently represent the lowest college completion rate as 33.5% of the fall 2010 cohort graduated within six years compared to the national average of 62.4% (Shapiro et al., 2017). Coupling the work of Tinto (1975) with the literature surrounding the Black male experience in college provides insight into the stark contrast in graduation rates. In the creation of a seminal model that explicates college dropout, Tinto (1975) stated, “other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater

will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion” (p. 96). This integration is particularly challenging for Black males who face racial hostility, isolation, racial stress, stigma as academically inept, and a variety of other hurtful stereotypes on college campuses (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2015; Parker, Puig, Johnson & Anthony, 2016). Further exploration into the unjust experiences of Black males shows why their integration into the academic and social structures of the college systems are in peril.

A qualitative study including 21 Black male undergraduates participating in focus groups at a large institution in the Southeast showed the realities of what Black male students experience (Parker et al., 2016). One theme revealed a campus climate issue as participants noted false messaging of diversity. This messaging touting diversity was incongruent with the campus having only White fraternity houses, a lack of Black professors, and no buildings named after Black people. A sense of racial profiling was expressed as well as a lack of trust for campus police. This climate taxed participants as the researchers concluded, “Black males in our study felt pressure to represent their race positively, present themselves as perfect, counteract stereotyping, and prove that they are just as smart, or smarter than White students” (Parker et al., 2016, p. 87). Revealing

similar themes, another qualitative study included individual interviews with 59 Black male participants at three different historically White institutions (Brooms & Davis, 2017). The participants experienced limited social integration, and a clear racial divide was visible on campus. Alienation was felt as campus activities and events seemed to be geared toward the needs of Whites. One student experienced verbal pressure to join minority student organizations as opposed to more traditional student groups such as the Student Government Association. Finally, participants felt a need to be careful about the way they presented themselves on campus, both in posture and dress, as to convince faculty they could perform academically (Brooms & Davis, 2017). These two studies clearly show the difficulties Black males unjustly experience on some campuses, and additional literature reveals that high-achieving Black males are not exempt from this treatment (Harper, 2015).

Harper (2015) conducted a qualitative study that included a sample of 143 Black male undergraduates with a 3.0 grade point average or higher from 30 different predominately White institutions. Only two of these participants could not think of a time they experienced a negative stereotype on campus. Some common stereotypes included that they: were good dancers, knew where to find drugs, came from an urban

community, were a student-athlete, knew hip-hop lyrics, and knew slang terms. One participant was disturbed when a White student approached him to purchase drugs. The frustration from the participant was palpable as he frequently wore suits, was headed for law school, and was positioning himself to be the president of student government. This type of prejudice is reminiscent of experiences students reported in a study from the previous decade (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Over 10 years prior to the previously discussed studies, Solorzano et al. (2000) conducted 10 focus groups with 34 Black male participants from three different predominately White institutions. In the academic space, the participants expressed feelings of invisibility while faculty had low expectations of them, and some were falsely accused of cheating. Racial segregation was experienced through study groups, and participants' admission into the institution was questioned. More overt racism was experienced outside of the classroom as participants stated that campus police ended Black social events and participants were perceived as a threat to public areas. These experiences led to self-doubt, loneliness, and frustration. Some felt their grades were negatively affected by the climate and had dropped classes or changed majors as a result. These descriptions and themes are not

a new phenomenon. After an extensive review of the literature on this topic, Harper (2013) stated, “Over 40 years of published research consistently documents troubling racial realities for Black undergraduates and other minoritized students on predominantly White campuses” (p. 206). This is a persistent problem that plagues predominantly White institutions, and evidence exists for the harm it inflicts (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff & Sriken, 2014).

Racial hostilities on college campuses cause harm as evidenced by a quantitative study that explored the relationship between self-esteem and microaggressions experienced by college students (Nadal et al., 2014). A sample of 225 ethnically diverse participants from a large metropolitan campus in the Northeast completed a survey that included the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES). REMS included six subscales that asked participants if they experienced specific types of microaggressions in the past six months, and SES contained 10 items assessing perceived individual worth. A significant negative correlation was found between the average scores of these two instruments ($r = -.124$, $p = .05$). Simply stated, the data showed there was an inverse relationship between a college student’s self-esteem and frequency of experi-

encing microaggressions. “Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 60). The literature reviewed in this essay showed that Black male undergraduates experienced both overt racism, and more subtle insults at some institutions. It is plausible that these experiences have caused some Black students to question their worth, which is an outcome that is inherently unacceptable.

The unjust treatment of Black male undergraduates, particularly at predominantly White institutions, is well documented, and this racial climate inhibits Black male undergraduates’ integration into college systems, causes self-doubt for some students, and perpetuates inequality in higher education (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2015; Parker et al., 2016; Solorzano et al., 2000). Biases that exist in the professional realm at institutions of higher education also deserve exploration as a contributing factor to the climate that inhibits the integration of Black male students into the college system.

Biases Surrounding Minority Faculty and Staff

Minority faculty are underrepresented at institutions in the United States. Data analysis

using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System showed that 77.3% of full-time faculty in the United States were White, 5.5% were Black, and 3.9% were Latino, while only 2% of full-time faculty at research institutions were Black in 2009 (Smith, Tovar, & Garcia, 2012). The analysis of these data also explored growth in the number of minority faculty from 1993 to 2009. Underrepresented minority faculty grew from 7.3% to 9.9% in this time frame, and Black faculty increased by one percentage point (Smith et al., 2012). While there are many complex factors underlying this underrepresentation, the simple reality is that Black male undergraduates must wrestle intellectually and emotionally with this lack of representation in the front of their classrooms. One possible factor for this underrepresentation may include the biases experienced by faculty on some campuses.

Support for this assertion is found in a mixed methods study that included 485 survey responses and 58 interviews with Black, Mexican American and Puerto Rican faculty at predominately White institutions (Zambrana et al., 2017). The survey responses revealed that 44% reported racial discrimination, 30% reported gender discrimination, and 23% reported class discrimination, while two-fifths of Black male and Puerto Rican male faculty reported discrimi-

nation as happening often or always by a colleague or superior. Qualitative data from interviews exposed themes of racism and deflation of accomplishments. Blatant racism was shown as a White faculty member expressed surprise that a Black colleague could do math, and a search committee chair posited that there was no need to consider a Black candidate because they currently over-serve this population. The concept of having enough minorities as a quota system was reported, and the participants experienced a lack of general support. Interviewees also reported experiencing pressure to have a larger load of service through an expectation of mentoring minority students and serving on multiple diversity related committees, which are not rewarded in the tenure process (Zambrana et al., 2017). These themes show the existing issues surrounding bias among professionals in higher education, and additional studies revealed similar themes (Salvucci & Lawless, 2016; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017).

A qualitative study included 10 Black males in professional roles ranging from faculty to professional staff at a large research institution in the Southeast (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). Themes of feeling isolated, having credentials questioned, authority challenged, and being overburdened to represent diversity emerged from the interviews.

They were often forced to be the voice for diversity, expected to be on diversity committees, and consult on diversity externally. The Black males in this study also felt they had to be very careful in how they expressed themselves as not to be thought of as aggressive (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). This type of marginalization experienced by minorities in higher education affects retention, and in turn exacerbates underrepresentation issues (Salvucci & Lawless, 2016).

A survey sent to a random selection of 667 nursing faculty in the United States received 103 responses (Salvucci & Lawless, 2016). Results indicated that 62.5% of Black faculty respondents ($n = 16$) believed physical appearance and speech related to race or ethnicity did have an influence on hiring. Although less of an issue to the respondents, 31% believed that physical appearance had an influence on retention. This study provides some evidence that biases on campus among professionals are a contributing factor to the underrepresentation of minority faculty on campuses. Salvucci and Lawless (2016) concluded that administrators need to focus more on the barriers that hinder diversity among nursing faculty. The connection to racial ostracism and retention is stated best in the conclusion of the study by Zambrana et al. (2017):

Our findings confirm that respondents continue to experience barriers

to full inclusion within academic institutions and experience a variety of microaggressions, including implicit and explicit racism and discrimination, a sense of isolation— and a devaluing of their research, which can negatively affect physical and mental well-being and the rate of workplace retention. (p. 225)

Biases of professionals serve in the continuation of inequality in higher education and this likely inhibits diverse faculty representation.

Connecting Biases among Minority Faculty and Black Male Students

This essay has demonstrated that both Black male students as well as minority faculty and staff experience microaggressions on some college campuses (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2015; Parker et al., 2016; Salvucci & Lawless, 2016; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). Biases among professionals has been linked to the underrepresentation of minority faculty (Salvucci & Lawless, 2016; Zambrana et al., 2017), and this underrepresentation serves as a contributing factor to the climate issues experienced by Black male students (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Parker et al., 2016).

A lack of black professors has been tied to campus climate issues and feelings of

isolation for Black male students (Parker et al., 2016). Additionally, Black male students have expressed that seeing and connecting with professors from their own racial group is important for their development. (Brooms and Davis, 2017). Brooms and Davis (2017) best summarized the student voice on this issues stating, "...students continue to desire increased diversity on college campuses in general and also call for increases in recruiting and retaining Black faculty members more specifically." (p. 322). Higher education faculty and staff should work to increase diversity among their peers on campus and should implement evidence-based practices to mitigate the experiences Black male undergraduates face on some college campuses.

Black Male Initiative Program as an Evidence-Based Practice

Using intentional leadership, professionals in higher education should seek to support or create thriving Black male initiative programs on their campuses to address the inequity experienced by these students. This is an evidence-based practice that has contributed to the performance, retention, college engagement, and support networks for Black undergraduates (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms, Goodman, & Clark, 2015). A qualitative study with 16 Black male undergraduates who participated in the Black Men

Achieve Program revealed a theme of self-empowerment (Brooms et al., 2015). As a result of the program, participants reported a belief in their ability to succeed academically, to create change, and a sense of belonging as they created a new collective identity that debunked stereotypes. They were able to meaningfully connect with peers and faculty in a way that allowed them to learn from other Black men. Participants found positive role models and professional development to be important within the inspired learning environment fostered by the program (Brooms et al., 2015).

Similar themes arose from a study that included eight students from a Black male leadership program at a predominately White institution (Barker & Avery, 2012). The participants experienced greater levels of engagement, received important resources, and had a better understanding of areas they needed to improve academically. "Through the program, students were able to build relationships, gain their academic footing, and increase their level of institutional engagement, while forming connections with other Black males and faculty and staff" (Barker & Avery, 2012, p. 82). Creating a Black male initiative program does not serve as a "solution" to the unjust experiences some students face on campuses as this is a larger systemic issue. However, these programs provide an evidence-based practice that may

contribute to the successes of Black males in a collegiate setting.

Before this essay advances further into the intentional leadership approach that might be suited for starting a Black male initiative program, a tension pressed upon minority faculty and staff should be addressed. Evidence supports the need for their inclusion as mentors for minority students, and yet at the same time studies also show they are overtaxed in these roles as well as in other diversity initiatives (Brooms and Davis, 2017; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017; Zambrana et al., 2017). This is a difficult reality, and these contributions should be better recognized for their value in the tenure process. One possible approach that could be used by a Black male initiative program, suggested by Barker and Avery (2012), is to incorporate Black male leaders from the community as well as alumni to serve in this mentor role.

Intentional Leadership for a Black Male Initiative Program

Practitioners should consider engaging in the process of intentional leadership to initiate such a program on their campus. Goleman (2000) suggested a framework in which leaders who get results use a variety of leadership styles at the right moment. Educational leaders who have no assigned authority to create a Black male initiative program should

focus on employing the democratic and affiliative leadership styles. The democratic leadership style entails working to include the voices of stakeholders to develop a consensus, and the affiliative style is focused on the value of individuals while building strong relationships with others. The democratic leadership style should be used because it is particularly useful when there is a need to garner support (Goleman, 2000). Practitioners should activate the democratic leadership style through the intentional incorporation of the voices of Black faculty, staff, and students. This might include campus wide invitations to an interest meeting on the creation of a Black male initiative program and gathering input through focus groups at the meeting. Creating the intentional space to gather input will increase engagement and improve programmatic development that meets the needs of Black male undergraduates on a specific campus.

The situation surrounding racial campus climate issues also warrants using the affiliative leadership style as Goleman (2000) suggests that the affiliative leadership style is best employed when there is a need to heal broken trust and when building team harmony is valuable. Using this leadership style, educational leader should attempt to build relationships with Black male student leaders on campus as well as passionate

faculty and staff who are committed to addressing the marginalization of these important students. Using both of these leadership styles the educational leader can build a team that is committed to creating change and can anticipate using team leadership to create a Black male initiative program rooted in empirically based practices.

Team leadership involves limited hierarchy, adaptive horizontal decision making, and distributed leadership among team members (Northouse, 2018). This leadership theory is ideal for developing a program in which no initial formal hierarchy exists and allows for team members to step forward to lead at the appropriate time. The specifics for developing a program would be unique to each campus in terms of how to seek funding, availability of structures for developing a formal program, and which stakeholders are important to include. The team should seek to include the following elements in the Black male initiative program found to be effective in the literature: workshops, professional development, features that enhance self-efficacy, thinking through negative racial experiences, and mentoring (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms et al., 2015). Finally, any such team should practice what Kouzes and Posner have termed as *outsight*, which is when leaders “look outside the particular program, department, or chapter they are in to find out, and even experience, what other groups like

theirs are doing” (2014, p. 127). This would likely include reaching out to or visiting other thriving Black Male initiative programs.

Three-Pronged Approach as an Evidence-Based Practice

Educational leaders can also apply evidence-based practices to address biases among faculty and professional staff that inhibit diversity and contributes to the climate issues felt by Black male students. Montana State University, for instance, implemented a three-step process within their faculty hiring process to remediate the issue of having 81% male faculty in science, technology, engineering, and math (Smith, Handley, Zale, Rushing, & Potvin, 2015; STEM). The process occurred in 23 STEM-faculty searches; this resulted in 6.3 times more likelihood of an offer being made to a woman, and women were 5.8 times more likely to accept the position. The first step of the process included the distribution of a search toolkit that provided search committees with practical strategies for steering a diverse applicant search. The second step included a presentation to the committee from another faculty member that included how to be aware of gender bias in an effort to avoid potential screening of candidates. Finally, the process included the final candidates meeting with a confidential, independent family advocate who could explain policies related to families or marital

status (Smith et al., 2015). Portions of this three-step approach with other empirically focused concepts could be used by professionals in higher education to address potential biases that affect diversity.

This essay proposes a three-pronged method that could be utilized to contend with the bias among professionals in order to enhance diverse representation. The first prong is identical to the first step found in Smith et al. (2015) with the exception that it would call for the development of a search toolkit that could be used both in hiring faculty and professional staff members. Another study provides additional depth to this first prong. Fujimoto (2012) conducted a case study that reviewed the affirmative action reports, human resource records of searches, and interviews of individuals involved in specific searches at a community college over a nine-year period. The study found that the usage of local data as a diversity benchmark and unnecessary minimum requirements in job postings led to stagnant growth in diversity. Fujimoto's (2012) first recommendation was to provide training to committees on conducting searches with an awareness of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity. The search toolkit in the first prong should include appropriate usage of data in hiring and improving job descriptions as not to unnecessarily exclude qualified minorities.

The second prong, again mirroring the work of Smith et al. (2015), would include search committees watching a brief video or attending a workshop on how to become aware of biases and inadvertent racism that affects both search processes and daily interactions with colleagues. Other researchers have called for similar raising of consciousness at institutions of higher education (Harper, 2015; Trevino, Balkin, & Gomez-Mejia, 2017; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). The final and third prong is the development of mentoring relationships for faculty and staff that could be aligned with campus needs. The survey study involving minority nursing faculty previously mentioned in this essay also included a question focused on what respondents believed was important for recruitment and retention (Salvucci & Lawless, 2016). The majority of Black nursing faculty believed support including mentors was essential. Other scholars have suggested that mentoring for women or minority professionals in higher education is an important practice to either improve campus climate, gender equity, guidance in the tenure process, or create important social support networks (Johnson, Warr, Hegarty, & Guillemin, 2015; Trevino et al., 2017; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017; Zambrana et al., 2017). To address the biases that limit diversity on campus, practitioners need to be prepared to

apply intentional leadership in the development and implementation of this three-pronged approach or other similar initiatives that better fit their contextual needs.

Intentional Leadership for a Three-Pronged Approach

Servant leadership is typified by organizational goals being secondary to the authentic service of followers and involves persuading by serving rather than through a command approach (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010; Northouse, 2013). This serve-first attitude is concerned with the development of others and would be an ideal philosophical lens for an educational leader implementing the three-pronged approach that seeks to build others' knowledge of conducting a diverse search, awareness of biases, and capacity to develop professionally through mentorship. In order to pursue these goals a leader may need to lay organizational goals aside to serve followers through an intentional focus on their development. Goleman's (2000) coaching leadership style could be appropriately applied here as well by focusing on developing others for the future rather than on immediate goals. If the three-prong method were successfully implemented, possible outcomes might be an improved campus climate that increases the retention and recruitment of underrepresented faculty and staff.

In turn, this increase in diversity in the professional realm may improve the climate issues experienced by Black male students.

Summary

Black male undergraduates face unjust treatment on many college campuses which is exacerbated by limited faculty representation. To create a more supportive and equitable environment, professionals in higher education should strive to develop or support thriving Black male initiative programs as well as incorporate a three-pronged approach for faculty and staff to include: a hiring search toolkit, a biases video or workshop, and professional mentoring. These interventions are by no means intended to "solve" the "problem" as the issues addressed in this essay are complex and systemic in nature. However, educators must still take some action as they strive for equity in education to maintain a just democracy. "...The deepening crisis in democracy is revealed by a systematic attack on those groups who occupy a fragile if marginal location in the structures of power that command the American economy and its various cultural apparatuses" (Giroux, 1996, p. 10). As a cultural apparatus, institutions of higher education must ensure they are not part of a systematic attack on marginalized groups. This will require higher education professionals to lead with intention and resolute conviction.

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